

# Nature as Harmony: The Foundation of Chinese Poetry

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This paper argues for the very foundation of Chinese poetry, that is, nature itself. To this end, I have chosen three well-known poets, Wang Wei (706-761) in Tang Dynasty (618-907), Su Shi (1037-1101) and Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073) in Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). All three poets were also high ranking governmental officials. They were leaders of high personal integrity.

*Keywords:* Chinese poetry, Tang Dynasty, Northern Song Dynasty, implication

## Introduction

As compared to Tang Dynasty, it has been argued that Northern Song Dynasty is in the state of great political instability. Yet regardless of the external condition, the poetry of these three poets is consistently foundational on inner and outer harmony.

In general, art and literature activities embody a great variety of subareas including music, painting, dancing, theater, calligraphy, religion, literary writings as well as poetry. This paper focuses specifically on the foundational nature of Chinese poetry. The aim is to show that throughout Chinese history, with the varied external conditions, Chinese poetry is foundational on nature itself. It is further argued that nature itself equates to inner and outer harmony.

## The Way of Life

In terms of 王維 (Wang Wei) in Tang Dynasty, his poem entitled: 終南別業 (On His South Mountain Villa) is chosen. The English translation and its Chinese original text are as follows:

To middle age I loved the Way. Late now, I lodge upon South Mountain.

If feelings rise, I go alone: Such scenes as I have seen...

Walk to where the waters narrow, sit, and wait, for the clouds to rise.

Let me meet by Chance with any old man: We laugh and chat, no thought of the return. (Translated by Jerome P. Seaton)

中歲頗好道，晚家南山陲。興來每獨往，勝事空自知。

行到水窮處，坐看雲起時。偶然值林叟，談笑無還期。(Cheng, 1982)

This poem covers a variety of features suggestive of nature as harmony. These include the dynamic changing scenery surrounding mountain, cloud and water. The symbolism here embodies both heavenly and earthly harmony. It further features the deep feelings and longings for a dear friend to share such joy. Hence the

single poem covers the entire range of interactions between nature itself and human fellowship.

### Symbol of Purity

Turning to 周敦頤 (Zhou Dunyi) during the Northern Song Dynasty, the title of his poem: 愛蓮說 (Ode to the Lotus / The Language of Flowers) is chosen. The English translation and its Chinese original text are as follows:

Lovers of flowering plants and shrubs we have had by scores, but Tao Yüan-ming alone devoted himself to the chrysanthemum. Since the opening days of the Tang Dynasty, it has been fashionable to admire the peony; but my favourite is the water-lily. How stainless it rises from its slimy bed! How modestly it reposes on the clear pool – an emblem of purity and truth! Symmetrically perfect, its subtle perfume is wafted far and wide, while there it rests in spotless state, something to be regarded reverently from a distance, and not be profaned by familiar approach. In my opinion, the chrysanthemum is the flower of retirement and culture; the peony, the flower of rank and wealth; the water-lily, the Lady Virtue sans pareille.

Alas; few have loved the chrysanthemum since Tao Yüan-ming; and none now love the water-lily like myself; whereas the peony is a general favourite with all mankind. (Translated by Herbert A. Giles)

水陸草木之花，可愛者甚蕃。晉陶淵明獨愛菊；自李唐來，世人盛愛牡丹；予獨愛蓮之出淤泥而不染，濯清漣而不妖，中通外直，不蔓不枝，香遠益清，亭亭靜植，可遠觀而不可褻玩焉。予謂：菊，花之隱逸者也；牡丹，花之富貴者也；蓮，花之君子者也。噫！菊之愛，陶後鮮有聞；蓮之愛，同予者何人？牡丹之愛，宜乎眾矣。(Liang, 1994)

Similar to Wang's poem, the key features of this poem are also suggestive of nature as harmony. Specifically, Zhou's poem focuses on the beauty of flowers. The symbolism concerns lotus' purity as it grows out of muddy waters. Lotus also symbolizes integrity and righteousness. As its stem is hollow inside. This symbolism is also well-known for bamboo's which further suggests humility.

In general, flower's hidden meanings include abundance, prosperity and official's integrity. The last three phrases concern the last individual differences in the judgement of the Beauty. This thus suggests that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder.

### Profound Spirit in Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism

Lastly turning to 蘇軾 (Su Shi) in the same Northern Song Dynasty, the title of his poem: 前赤壁賦 (My First Visit to the Red Cliff) is chosen. The English translation and its Chinese original text are as follows:

It was the 17th day of the 7th month in the autumn of the year Ren Xu when I sailed down to the foot of the Red Cliff with some friends.

I commented, "Do you happen to know the nature of water or the moon? Water is always on the run like this, but never lost in its course; the moon always waxes and wanes like that, but never out of its sphere. When viewed from a changing perspective, nothing in this universe can remain unchanged even within a blink of an eye, but when looked at from an unchanging perspective, everything conserves itself, and so do we. Therefore, what's in them to be admired? Besides, in this universe, everything has its rightful owner. If something does not belong to you, then you shall not even have a bit of it. However, the fresh breeze over this river and the bright moon above the mountains are an exception. If you can hear it, it is a sound to you; if you can see it, it is a view to you. It never ends and is never exhausted. It is the infinite treasure that nature has for both of us to enjoy. (Translated by Yingcai Xu)

壬戌之秋，七月既望，蘇子與客泛舟遊於赤壁之下。

蘇子曰：“客亦知夫水與月乎？逝者如斯，而未嘗往也；盈虛者如彼，而卒莫消長也，蓋將自其變者而觀之，則天地曾不能以一瞬；自其不變者而觀之，則物與我皆無盡也，而又何羨乎？且夫天地之間，物各有主，苟非吾之所有，雖一毫而莫取。惟江上之清風，與山間之明月，耳得之而為聲，目遇之而成色，取之無禁，用之不竭，是造物者之無盡藏也，而吾與子之所共適。”(Xu, 2011)

The key features of this poem are: nature is influx all the time, and at the same time it remains unchanged; nature can be owned by anyone and yet, it becomes one's own treasure when it touches one's soul.

The universality of this Chinese poem can be summarized in the following well-known sentiment: “Be aware of the place where you are brought to tears. That's where I am, and that's where your treasure is” (Coelho, 1998).

### Conclusion

The social-cultural-economic-political characteristic of Tang Dynasty is perceived as the one of the most harmonious periods in Chinese history. Through generations of well-loved emperors of this lengthy period, people enjoyed “天下太平” (the four characters meaning Heaven-below-extreme peace). This is in essence the achievement of Tao.

With particular reference to Wang's poem, the key point also concerns the 道 (Tao). In fact, the original Taoist text written by the founder Laozi has been translated into English. Laozi's original writing and its translation are as follows: 人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然。

Man follows the ways of the Earth. The Earth follows the ways of Heaven, Heaven follows the ways of Tao, Tao follows its own ways. (Wu, 1989)

It is obvious that Wang's poem almost one thousand years after the Master's text, focuses exactly on the Tao, the nature itself. In contrast to the Tang Dynasty, the Northern Song Dynasty is seen as being in the state of great political instability and the bitter rivalry between revisionist and conservative factions at court (National Palace Museum, Taipei, 2000).

However, the two contrasting lexicon used in the article needs further clarification as in the following comparison:

Table 1

*Differences between Revisionist and Conservative in Their Social and Political Views in Chinese Philosophy*

“Revisionist”	“Conservative”
Progressive	Traditional
Based on Original Taoism	Based on Traditional Confucianism
Emphasizing Nature Itself	Emphasizing Social Rituals and Humaneness
Original Nature as Inner-Outer Harmony	Traditional Rituals as Basis of Human Civilization

Once the contrasting lexicon is clarified, it becomes obvious the essence of the “instability” concerns the division between external rituals and a harmonious balance between internal world and external rituals. Despite the adverse external conditions, the poetic style of both Zhou and Su is still characterized by the foundational nature of Chinese poetry.

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